

APRIL 7, 1977

April showers started the last week in March in the Shortgrass Country. Herders tore out to their ranches to dump rain gauges that contained amounts running from a half inch to the bountiful 4s.

I celebrated the rain by going to a big party at the Country Club in San Angelo. Mrs. Goat Whiskers the Younger and two of her compadres gave a deal called a winefest.

It was a fancy affair. About a dozen tables covered in white linen were laid out in the ballroom. Each table had a different kind of wine and a big wheel of cheese as an accompaniment. Over in one corner, musicians were playing wine festival songs. Ladies and gentlemen were dressed in fine fashion.

Before the party, I'd studied up on wine talk. I didn't want to get over there and forget and order a draft instead of a goblet. Wines, I learned, are named after the grapes or the districts of origin. Right smart fellows that can speak three or four languages can make wine conversation go faster than a pit man shouts the market on Wall Street.

Not even the World Book knows how long man has known how to make wine. Nor does it say in the encyclopedia how long it's going to take man to learn how to drink wine. All it says is that certain wines should be taken with certain foods at certain temperatures. I believe if I could have added a footnote, I'd have said the best advice on drinking wine is to circulate the news to the world's high school students that a half gallon of red at a senior prom would give them a hangover that'd make the 10 most dreaded diseases seem like a skin rash.

You know, wine drinking is a mark of sophistication. One time my brother and I were in a carpeted restaurant in Santa Fe, N.M. The wine steward got so upset over my indifference to allowing a bottle of Boudreaux to do some breathing, that later in the night, we saw him drinking tequila sours in a bar that never had seen anyone in a black coat.

I learned right then that you treated wine waiters and wine with plenty of respect. You don't ask them why they want to air a bottle out, or let it catch its breath. Wine isn't like that homebrew that was once so popular at country dances. The breathing is for the drink, not the drinker.

As the party turned out, I didn't have to use bouquet or body to operate. Three hundred guests were milling about the room. Only thing anyone had to say was, "I beg your pardon," or "Oh, excuse me."

I didn't have to say that much. Child Who Sits in the Sun hooked her shooting finger in my back belt loop. Nearest I came to sampling any of Mrs. Whiskers' wine was a glass of apple cider that waiters were passing around to stabilize the taste buds.

Small talk will get you by at big parties without knowing anything else. Without any schooling at all, an old boy who was never any closer to a bottle of wine than watching Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt christen a battleship on a newsreel can get by. I learned a long time ago that when you are outclassed just say "Indeed!" Indeed is the best social word in the language. You can dabble olives and handle toothpicks at the fanciest function of the year using indeed. I swear by the word. Try it out someday and you'll see that I'm right.

It must have taken a lot of pressure off Mrs. Whiskers to have the good rain to divert Goat Whiskers the Youngers' attention from the wine hills to the rangelands. Twenty-four hours before the party, Whiskers was carrying on something awful about the coffee expense that his fence builders were running up. As eloquent as he was on the price of coffee, he probably could have delivered a mighty pointed sermon on the cost of imported wine for 300 people.

Bankers were muttering about \$40 cake bills in the old cows. Quite private sessions of herder were beginning to be nothing but throat clearing meetings in which spoons rattling broke the stillness. Now the rains have come. Winter is over. Good for Mrs. Whiskers for showing some respect.